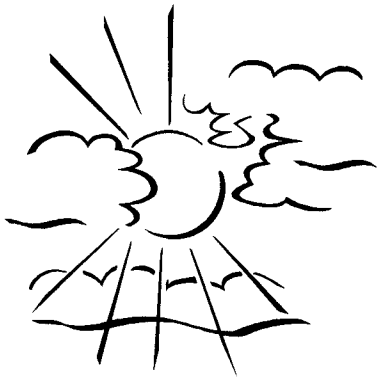


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Articles in Today's Clips

Friday, December 2, 2005

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Plan to cut long-term welfare recipients clears state committee

12/1/2005, 4:59 a.m. ET

By AMY F. BAILEY The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Welfare recipients who can work could not receive cash assistance after four years, according to legislation approved by state House committee.

The legislation would allow people on the welfare rolls for more than four years to receive a one-year grace period before possibly losing their aid. It would affect about 8,100 cases, or about 20,000 individuals, including many children, according to a nonpartisan House Fiscal Agency analysis.

The measure also would require adults receiving aid to complete a job training program or get a high-school equivalency degree.

The time limit would not apply to recipients with severe mental or physical disabilities, or those supporting a disabled family member. About 4,500 welfare recipients had been on the rolls for more than four years in August because they were disabled or taking care of a disabled relative. The five Republicans who control the House Family and Children Services Committee voted Wednesday evening to send the welfare legislation to the full House, where it was to be taken up as early as Thursday.

The four Democrats on the committee abstained from voting after a few complained that they did not have enough time to review the large package of legislation.

Rep. Jerry Kooiman, a Grand Rapids Republican who helped develop the nine-bill package, said the four-year limit on cash assistance for most recipients is intended to encourage people to move off welfare.

"It's a deadline and we all work better under deadlines," Kooiman said.

A number of advocacy groups have spoken out against the four-year limit on cash assistance, including the Michigan League for Human Services and the Michigan Catholic Conference. They said unexpected circumstances and the state's cyclical economy could leave former welfare recipients without a job — and a way to receive assistance — in the future.

"Any lifetime limit in my opinion should not be a hard and fast absolute," Democratic Rep. Chris Kolb of Ann Arbor said Wednesday during a House committee hearing on the bills. "If we're going to have one, let's make sure we have some exceptions and immediate outs."

The five Republicans who control the House Family and Children Services Committee voted Wednesday evening to send the welfare legislation to the full House, where it could be taken up as early as Thursday. The four Democrats on the committee abstained from voting after a few complained that they did not have enough time to review the large package of legislation. The four-year time limit would save the state about \$40 million in its first full year of implementation, the House Fiscal Agency said.

About 212,000 people currently receive cash assistance, the House Fiscal Agency said. The average monthly payment per household is \$415, or about \$5,000 a year, the agency said.

Longtime welfare recipients would have to be individually assessed by a caseworker to determine their ability to work, according to the House legislation. Those who can work would quickly receive a wide variety of services such as job training to help them move off welfare within the four-year window.

Welfare recipients would not have their time on cash assistance counted if they are living in an area with at least a 10 percent unemployment rate. In October, the areas with the highest unemployment rates were Flint and Detroit-Warren-Livonia, each at 6 percent.

Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm said this week she could agree with a four-year limit on cash assistance for able-bodied adults.

"But I do think within that 48 months, there has to be an ability for welfare recipients to get specific, concrete training to be placed into the work force," she said at a news conference.

Legislation that would set a similar four-year time limit for aid won approval from the Senate Families and Human Services Committee on Tuesday. Those bills, likely to be taken up Thursday by the full Senate, would allow welfare recipients who have been in compliance with work and training requirements for four years to apply for a one-year extension.

Lawmakers are taking quick action on the legislation because several provisions of the current welfare law expire at the end of the year, including the sections that spell out which groups can be exempt from work requirements and that lay out sanctions for noncompliance.

Kooiman and other House Republicans who have been spent months researching the current welfare system said their proposal puts more emphasis on education and training to help recipients move from minimum-wage jobs to those with long-term stability.

It would allow welfare recipients to work fewer hours for six months to complete their education, finish a job training program or get their GED. It also would require welfare caseworkers to create a detailed development plan for each of the recipients in their caseload. The plan would lay out specific goals and responsibilities for recipients.

Kooiman emphasized that while the program will cost more when recipients first enter the system, it will save money by limiting benefits and setting stricter penalties for recipients who do not comply with work and training requirements.

The welfare bills are House Bills 4121 and 5438-46; Senate Bills 892-94.

On the Net:

Michigan Legislature: <http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

Michigan League for Human Services: <http://www.milhs.org>

Senate approves limiting welfare; House also to vote

12/1/2005, 6:01 p.m. ET

By AMY F. BAILEY The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — The state Senate voted Thursday to limit cash assistance for able-bodied welfare recipients to four years and to implement a two-year ban on aid for those who fail to comply with work or training requirements three times.

The House was scheduled Thursday to vote on similar legislation, which would be the first significant change to the state's welfare program since former Gov. John Engler overhauled it in the 1990s.

The House and Senate were considering slightly different reforms, but both want to provide more education and job skills recipients, limit benefits and set tougher penalties for failing to comply with requirements.

They want to give welfare recipients more time to get an education and require caseworkers to do a thorough assessment of people when they apply for cash assistance. Those provisions are intended to help move people into long-term employment rather than simply moving them to the first available job that pays minimum wage.

"We need to create a shift in the way we think and respond to welfare," said Rep. Jerry Kooiman, a Grand Rapids Republican who is shepherding the bills through the House. "Welfare should be designed to empower people, to get them back on their feet. Our system in Michigan is doing just the opposite."

The House and Senate are considering welfare reforms because several provisions of the current law are scheduled to sunset at the end of the year. Lawmakers who support the proposed changes hope to get final versions of the bills to Gov. Jennifer Granholm before they begin their holiday recess in a few weeks.

Legislation that was to be considered by the House only would allow welfare recipients to continue receiving cash assistance after four years if they are disabled or they are taking care of a disabled relative. Able-bodied adults on the welfare rolls for more than four years would get a one-year grace period before possibly losing their aid.

The Republican-controlled Senate voted 24-11, mostly along party lines, to approve a four-year limit with slightly more flexibility. It would allow welfare recipients who have followed work and training requirements for four years to apply for a one-year extension at any time.

"This will not leave people high and dry," said Sen. Bill Hardiman, a Kentwood Republican and chairman of the Senate Families and Human Services Committee. "We're trying to keep people from being stuck in a very bad situation, a cycle of dependency."

A four-year limit would affect about 8,100 cases, or about 20,000 individuals, including many children, according to a nonpartisan House Fiscal Agency analysis.

Some lawmakers are concerned about a four-year limit.

"You go ahead and kick them off, you're still going to be taking care of them," said Sen. Shirley Johnson, R-Troy. "Don't sit here and be judgmental."

About 212,000 people currently receive cash assistance, the House Fiscal Agency said. The average monthly payment per household is \$415, or about \$5,000 a year, the agency said. The House legislation would set up a three strike policy for failing to comply with work and training requirements. The first offense would mean 30 days without cash assistance, 90 days for a second offense and a lifetime ban for a third offense.

The sanctions in the Senate bills are slightly less harsh: 30 days without cash assistance for a first offense, 60 days for second offense and two years for a third offense.

Sharon Parks, vice president for policy at the Lansing-based Michigan League for Human Services, said she is concerned about the fallout of stricter sanctions for noncompliance.

A two-year ban on cash assistance "could ultimately result in harm to children if resources are not available for the family to meet its basic needs," the league said in its position paper on the Senate legislation.

The welfare bills are House Bills 4121 and 5438-46; Senate Bills 892-94.

On the Net:

Michigan Legislature: <http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

Michigan League for Human Services: <http://www.milhs.org>

Senate, House Push Forward With Welfare Changes

The Senate and House both passed similar but separate changes to the state's welfare system that are billed as helping able-bodied recipients permanently get off the rolls, but are viewed by most Democrats as short-sighted measures that may make a bad situation worse for the state's down-and-out.

The bills' more controversial features are that they create a lifetime limit of four years on able-bodied recipients and contain a "three-strikes-and-you're-out" policy for those who "refuse to work."

Republicans pointed out that legislation came after a series of bi-partisan, bi-cameral workgroups that collected testimony from welfare workers across the state, who apparently said some tougher sanctions are needed in the system to motivate recipients to succeed, according to Rep. Tom **PEARCE** (R-Rockford).

"Let's do the things we need to do to help these last 77,000 (people on welfare) be successful," Pearce said.

In the House, the key bills passed 63-44 with some support from Democrats in marginal districts. The most controversial bill in the Senate passed 24-11, basically under the same dynamics.

Democrats and Republicans do agree on many aspects of the reform. They agree on more literacy programs, expanded education programs and individual attention to recipients so their individual barriers can be addressed before letting them into the workplace.

Rep. Chris **KOLB** (D-Ann Arbor) said he appreciated working with the House lead on the bills — Rep. Jerry **KOOIMAN** (R-Grand Rapids) — but stressed more work needs to be done to make sure a future economic downturn or unforeseen situation doesn't permanently ban genuinely good people from assistance. He also argued the three strikes rule was unnecessarily punitive.

A passionate debate, likely inflamed by the 10 p.m. time on the clock, preceded the vote in the House with Kooiman accusing Rep. Michael **MURPHY** (D-Lansing) of sleeping through his explanation of how the package was compassionate toward people, contrary to Murphy's previous comments on the bills.

Kooiman was booed and hissed by Democrats, who were promptly gavelled down. Kooiman later apologized for the comments and also expressed his desire to put together a meaningful package.

"We owe it to the residents of this state to create accountability in our welfare system," he said. "In order to release people from the trap of poverty, we need to develop a program to succeed."

The key bills in the package — **HB 5440**, **HB 5441** and **HB 5445** — passed with all Republican support. Reps. Dudley **SPADE** (D-Tipton), Kathy **ANGERER** (D-Dundee) and Gary **McDOWELL** (D-Rudyard) joined Republicans in voting for all three. Reps. Jeff **MAYES** (D-Bay City), John **ESPINOZA** (D-Croswell), Chris **KOLB** (D-Ann Arbor) and Joel **SHELTROWN** (D-West Branch) also voted for at least one of these bills.

In the Senate, Sen. Bill **HARDIMAN** (R-Kentwood) proposed a few amendments to **SB 0892** that include additional conditions to exempt a person from working in the Work First Program for a period of time. All three of his amendments passed.

Sen. Bev. **HAMMERSTROM** (R-Temperance) introduced an amendment to **SB 0892** that would allow

people who are not ready to get a GED to enter into different educational programs that would prepare them for the certificate.

Hammerstrom's amendment, which passed, was a response to Department of Human Services (DHS) concerns that requiring people who are not ready to take a GED to get a GED sets them up for failure. New requirements to the Work First Program outlined in SB 0892 originally didn't consider this problem.

SB 0892 passed with a vote of 31-3. Sens. Shirley **JOHNSON** (R-Troy), Martha G. **SCOTT** (D-Highland Park) and Burton **LELAND** (D-Detroit) cast no votes and Sen. Ken **SIKKEMA** (R-Wyoming) did not vote.

Sen. Gilda **JACOBS** (D-Huntington Woods) offered an amendment to SB 0893 that would have let departments that assess Work First people, such as the DHS, to extend their welfare aid beyond the lifetime limit of 48 months if they felt the person needed more time.

During committee meetings Wednesday, the DHS and other Welfare agencies expressed concern about the limit. The committee did offer a substitute that extended the limit to 60 months under certain conditions.

Jacobs's argument for her amendment was that services like DHS are very apt at assessing who needs more time. This would allow people such as single mothers and those who have education problems more time to get on their feet.

"There are situations out there that none of us have ever experienced," Johnson said. "There are predicaments that people get in that a legislative body cannot predict."

Cropsey said adding that amendment would make the bill pointless because it could essentially take away lifetime guidelines for everyone, a provision the Governor specifically said she wanted included.

"I'm uncomfortable with just letting the department make that decision on their own," Cropsey said.

Cropsey added that even when a person reaches the lifetime limit, they still have access to other aid such as food stamps, earned income tax credits and free and reduced lunch.

Hardiman added an amendment to SB 0893 that would require the department to help people reaching the lifetime welfare limit get access to other assistance. His amendment passed.

SB 0893 passed 24-11 with members voting along party lines. Johnson was the only Republican casting a no vote and Sens. James **BARCIA** (D-Bay City), Dennis **OLSHOVE** (D-Warren) and Mark **SCHAUER** (D-Battle Creek) were the only Dems who voted for the bill.

SB 0894 passed unanimously.

Sens. Irma **CLARK-COLEMAN** (D-Detroit), Bob **EMERSON** (D-Flint) and Virg **BERNERO** (D-Lansing) were absent.

Michigan Report

December 1, 2005

WELFARE REFORM BILLS PASS **SENATE, HOUSE**

Able-bodied welfare recipients would be eligible for cash assistance for a maximum of four years under a package of welfare reform bills passed by the Senate and House on Thursday.

Welfare recipients could be eligible for an additional 12 months of benefits under SB 892 (passed 31-3), SB 893 (passed 24-11), and SB 894 (35-0). The House legislation is HB 5438 (64-43), HB 5439 (56-51), HB 5440 (62-45), HB 5441 (62-45), HB 5442 (101-6), HB 5443 (92-15), HB 5444 (72-35), HB 5445 (63-44), HB 5446 (67-40).

Efforts in the Senate to amend the package to give the state greater flexibility to allow a recipient to continue getting cash benefits for a longer period if it felt circumstances warranted were defeated. But sponsors of the package said they would be willing to look at the proposal as the bills move towards final approval.

The state's current welfare laws expire at the end of the year.

Earlier this week, Governor Jennifer Granholm surprised many by saying she could support a 48-month limit on benefits for able-bodied adults.

However, on Thursday, Sen. Gilda Jacobs (D-Huntington Woods) said the administration favored her proposal giving the state greater flexibility to allow individuals to get continued benefits under some circumstances.

Currently, there is no time limit on cash benefits. Federal law limits recipients to five years, but exempts states where less than 20 percent of recipients meet that threshold, which is true for Michigan. But state law allows for use of state funds to cover residents should they not be eligible for federal funds.

And while the proposals would impose a time limit, it also puts an emphasis on ensuring that current recipients have the education and training needed to get employable skills. The packages would cover benefits during a time when recipients were obtaining a graduate equivalency degree or other training. The Senate package was amended on Thursday to also provide for benefits while a recipient was studying English language proficiency or developing greater literacy skills.

Supporters of the Senate package also said that while individuals could lose basic cash benefits they would still be eligible for such benefits as food aid and heating assistance.

Sen. Bill Hardiman (R-Kentwood) said that the initial 1996 welfare reform proposal was successful in reducing the number of people now receiving welfare benefits. But it is time now to take greater steps to move more people into self-sufficiency, he said.

The major controversy though dealt with letting the state decide if a person should be permitted to remain on cash benefits past the initial 48 months time limit and the 12-month extension.

Sen. Shirley Johnson (R-Troy) referred repeatedly to former Governor John Engler, saying that he strongly urged allowing for flexibility when dealing with poor individuals. "There are predicaments people get into that we as a legislative body cannot predict," Ms. Johnson said. "Don't sit here and be judgmental. You don't have the right."

And Sen. Deborah Cherry (D-Burton) said that while individuals would still be eligible for benefits such as food aid, that the basic cash benefit is what is used to help pay rent. "I don't want to be in a situation where we put children and their mothers out on the street," she said.

Sen. Alan Cropsey (R-DeWitt) said for the time being the bill should move without that provision. The Senate version is more liberal than the House version, because it has the 12-month extension, he said, and he was open to further discussion on the proposal.

But "I am uncomfortable with the department making decisions on their own," he said.

Sen. Martha Scott (D-Highland Park), however, blasted the package, saying in a press release that it tore more holes in the state's safety net and would hurt "thousands of innocent persons."

Both the House and Senate package also calls for the state to develop plans with welfare recipients on how to move them into self-sufficiency, and increases the amount of income a family can earn and remain eligible for assistance.

In the House, Democrats and Republicans clashed on the quick timeline of moving the bills and its impact on families and children.

"This is creating the tools (for self-sufficiency). That is treating people humanly," said. Rep. Jerry Kooiman (R-Grand Rapids). "It is my hope we won't have to use the sanctions."

Democrats agreed reforms should be discussed, but said they would not support such swift movement on the bill.

“We’ve been talking about jobs and creating opportunity,” Rep. Michael Murphy (D-Lansing). “I don’t believe a word of it that it’s going to improve opportunity.”

Key components of the House package creates a “three-strike” rule for welfare recipients who fail to comply with the work requirement and including use of out-of-state welfare assistance for residents who have lived in Michigan for less than a year toward the 48-month limit.

Mr. Kooiman said it’s likely the House and Senate will find an agreement, which could happen by keeping the bills in each chamber and moving out only certain bills, or by taking the legislation into conference committee.

Published December 2, 2005
[From the Lansing State Journal]

Welfare reform bills win approval

Lawmakers pass limits on aid, penalties for abuse

By Amy F. Bailey
Associated Press

State lawmakers voted Thursday to limit cash assistance for able-bodied welfare recipients to four years and to implement harsh penalties for those who fail to comply with work or training requirements.

The House and Senate approved slightly different measures which must be reconciled before going to Gov. Jennifer Granholm. If Granholm signs the measure, it would be the most significant change to the welfare program since the 1990s.

The reforms are intended to provide more education and job skills to welfare recipients, limit benefits and set tougher penalties for failing to comply with requirements.

The House version, approved 64-43, only allows welfare recipients to continue receiving aid after four years if they are disabled or taking care of a disabled relative. The Senate version, approved 24-11, allows recipients who have followed work and training requirements for four years to apply for a one-year extension.

Some lawmakers are concerned about a four-year limit.

"You go ahead and kick them off, you're still going to be taking care of them," said Sen. Shirley Johnson, R-Troy.

The House legislation would set up a three-strike policy for failing to comply with work and training requirements. The first offense would mean 30 days without cash assistance, 90 days for a second offense and a lifetime ban for a third offense. The Senate version carries 30-day, 60-day and two-year penalties.

Highlights of the state House GOP welfare reform plan

11/30/2005, 5:19 p.m. ET

By The Associated Press

(AP) — Highlights of a plan by state House Republicans to reform the state's welfare program:

- _ Require recipients who can work to stop receiving cash assistance after four years.
- _ Allow recipients with severe mental or physical disabilities, or those supporting a disabled family member, to receive cash assistance longer than four years.
- _ Require recipients who had been excused from working to be evaluated for other work-related activities such as community service, public education or volunteerism before being granted an exemption.
- _ Require fewer work hours for six months to allow recipients to complete their education, finish a job training program or get a high school equivalency degree.
- _ Allow recipients who are working to take home more of their income without losing benefits.
- _ Offer tax incentives for Michigan employers who hire from the Work First program.
- _ Set up a three-strike policy for noncompliance that would mean 30 days without cash assistance for the first offense, 90 days for a second offense and a lifetime ban for a third offense.

Source: House Republican Communications Office.

WELFARE REFORM STILL HAS LINGERING QUESTIONS

While the House Family and Children Services Committee took testimony and quickly reported out a package of bills aimed at reforming the state's welfare system, some remaining concerns regarding a lifetime limit and a three-strike rule were raised by House Democrats and child advocacy groups.

However, Rep. Jerry Kooiman (R-Grand Rapids), who served as co-chair of a task force that examined reforms to the welfare system, said the legislative package remains a work in progress.

Some of the key components of the legislation involve putting a cumulative 48-month lifetime limit on cash assistance to able-bodied adults in the welfare system, requiring federal Supplemental Security Income to be included as income for determining eligibility, creating a "three-strike" rule for welfare recipients who fail to comply with the work requirement and including use of out-of-state welfare assistance for residents who have lived in Michigan for less than a year toward the 48-month limit.

Able-bodied adults currently on the program for more than 48 months would have assistance continued for a year.

Exemptions for able-bodied adults include a "clock-stopper" section that does not count months toward the 48 rule if the welfare recipient is living in a metropolitan area with an unemployment rate of 10 percent or higher.

The legislative package also includes provisions for better assessment of potential welfare recipients at the beginning, so that literacy issues can be addressed and a high school equivalency can be obtained. The package (HB 5438, HB 5439, HB 5440, HB 5441, HB 5442, HB 5443, HB 5444, HB 5445, HB 5446) also would allow welfare clients to keep \$200 of their work earnings plus another 50 percent, which is an effort to encourage people to work more, Mr. Kooiman said. Current law states welfare clients can keep \$200 plus another 20 percent.

Another provision of the package would change assistance for higher education from one year to two years. Reports on the success and failures of this program would then have to be provided by the Work First Program to the Legislature on a quarterly basis.

Savings to the welfare program would come in the form of getting people off the system, with \$40.3 million coming from the 48-month limit, \$8.6 million from a 10 percent reduction in payments for groups participating in Work First with one employed group

member, \$77 million by using the SSI requirement and at least \$16 million from sanctions related to missed work for first-time offenders and additional savings for second and third-time violations.

However, there are added costs, most of which have not been determined, with the reform package because of the additional services provided for obtaining education and better communication between DHS and Work First caseworkers and out-of-state welfare departments.

Mr. Kooiman characterized the reforms as creating more individual responsibility and incentive to work for able-bodied adults, while still providing assistance to the disabled and elderly.

“My goal is to have the welfare system more efficient and more effective,” he said. “I believe the current welfare law traps people in poverty. States that are successful in getting people out of poverty were those with the services up front.”

Because some of the provisions sunset at the end of the year, there is a vehicle bill (HB 4121) to continue the current statute until 2006. Mr. Kooiman said that is in place in case the disagreements between legislative Republicans and Democrats, as well as the administration, cannot be resolved.

However, Democrats fired back that while there are agreements on policy changes, putting limits and increased sanctions on assistance is a dangerous road to travel.

Rep. Chris Kolb (D-Ann Arbor) said there will be some situations that will be out of a welfare recipient’s control where the person will not be able to meet the work requirement and will then be sanctioned or taken off the rolls with the lifetime limit.

“Be careful with absolutes,” he said, referring to cases involving children.

Child advocacy groups echoed that sentiment during testimony.

He also cautioned on reducing benefits because they have not been changed since 1992 and further depleting them could have an adverse affect. Mr. Kolb also called on adding more short-term assistance and child support measures, which are not included in the package.

Rep. Brenda Clack (D-Flint), sponsor of the sunset extension bill, said that with the economy in a downturn, perhaps it was not the time to address such reforms in the welfare system.

“There is a lot of stress in this state,” she said. “When I looked at these types of reform, I see the burden on the backs of children and the burden on the backs of grandparents.”

Another Democrat, Rep. Dudley Spade (D-Tipton), also cautioned the use of the 10 percent unemployment rule because people could move to those metropolitan areas to avoid hitting the proposed 48-month limit.

Mr. Kooiman said he had not taken that idea under consideration but would look into it further.

Mr. Spade then used that example as a reason why Republicans should not rush the passage of this legislation, which was introduced last week after being studied by a task force for several months.

Many Republicans complimented the bicameral and bipartisan task force for its work; however, Rep. Barb Vander Veen (R-Allendale) did show some concern that the sanctioning would be left up to the subjectivity of a caseworker, though in the end, she voted in support of the legislation.

During the voting, Democrats on the panel abstained from voting, so the bills were reported out with the Republican majority.

Both sides said there has been open dialogue on the issue of welfare reform and will continue to be during further negotiations.

Lansing State Journal

Letters

December 1, 2005

Intervene for kids

Ottawa County Prosecutor Ron Franz's Nov. 20 Forum column was right on target. I applaud his advocacy for prevention services for Michigan's vulnerable children.

Focusing on prevention and early intervention is a key strategy for the Michigan Department of Human Services. Engaging early with communities and families to help kids stay safely in their homes - or home communities - is a cornerstone of the Family to Family approach, now rolling out statewide.

The Early Childhood Investment Corporation, announced by the governor in her State of the State message, will foster community Great Start collaboratives to expand the availability of high-quality early education and child care, including parent education.

Prevention and early intervention services are too often seen as simply "nice to have." These services are not only essential, but literally life-saving. Let us all strengthen our resolve to help Michigan's children now, before the clock runs out.

Marianne Udow
director
Michigan Department of
Human Services

Mother raised day-care abuse claim in 2002

Friday, December 02, 2005

By Ken Kolker
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- A mother said her then-4-year-old daughter complained nearly four years ago that the man at the day-care center changed her diaper.

"I said, 'You don't even wear diapers. What are you talking about?'" the woman recalled.

That is when the girl told her Kristopher Cross, who owned the home with his wife, Amanda, touched her privates, Grand Rapids mother said. That was January 2002, about two months after the Cross home was licensed by the state.

"This could have been stopped four years ago," said the woman, 26, who said her daughter was not deemed a credible witness by authorities.

Charges were never brought, and the Cross home at 2642 Fuller Ave. NE continued to operate. Cross was back in jail today after police obtained a warrant charging him with sexually assaulting a third girl at the home.

The new charges allege Cross, 33, sexually assaulted a 7-year-old girl four times while she was being cared for at the home.

Police obtained the warrants Thursday after interviewing the girl, Grand Rapids Police Sgt. Tim Williams said. They immediately arrested Cross, who was free on bond. Cross already faced charges of sexually assaulting two girls at the home, ages 5 and 7.

He also is accused of possessing child pornography on his home computer.

One girl told police he assaulted her in the basement -- in a computer room or a playroom -- while his wife was upstairs, Williams said.

The alleged assaults occurred between 2002 and 2004 -- after the 4-year-old girl made her allegations.

The girl's mother said she brought her daughter to the Children's Assessment Center in Grand Rapids in early 2002, where police work with social workers to interview children who are victims of suspected sexual abuse.

But the social worker who interviewed her daughter concluded the girl had a "vivid imagination," the woman said. Clouding the girl's story were claims that her "mommy" and another woman bite her.

The mother wonders if Cross fed her daughter those stories to confuse the girl and make anything she said unbelievable.

She said Grand Rapids police did not interview her or her daughter.

Williams said Cross denied the allegations in 2002 when questioned by a detective. A state worker who investigates day-care operations also was involved in the case, Williams said.

He said the girl's story was not enough to lead to charges at the time.

"It was unfortunate. I wish there would have been more there at the time."

Cross denied all allegations. In court documents, police said Cross failed a lie-detector test.

Those tests, however, are inadmissible in court.

The day-care home no longer is in operation.

The woman said she met with Police Detective Dan Adams on Wednesday after learning about the recent allegations against Cross.

Adams, who is assigned to the Children's Assessment Center, said cases involving young children are difficult because youngsters often do not make good witnesses.

"Whether it's fortunate or unfortunate, the court system requires a victim to be able to testify and point out the abuser," he said.

Usually, children younger than 7 are interviewed only by a specially trained social worker, while a detective looks on from a separate observation room, Adams said.

He said it was not unusual for a suspect to feed stories to children to confuse them during the "grooming phase" that leads to sexual abuse.

The woman said she started taking her daughter and son, then 3, to the home in January 2002, shortly after it opened.

Purchase of day care shocks families

Friday, December 02, 2005

By Ken Kolker
The Grand Rapids Press

The state is questioning how a man under investigation for sexually assaulting children at a day care in his home was at the same time able to buy a large day-care center in Alpine Township. Kristopher Cross, 33, is accused of assaulting three girls ages 5 through 7 at the Northeast Side home, a charge he denied. He was back in jail today after charges involving a third girl were filed.

He told The Press on Thursday, before his latest arrest, that he and his wife, Amanda Cross, bought the separate Family and Friends Day Care, 3999 Alpenhorn Drive NW, four months ago. He is not accused of assaulting children at that center.

A woman whose two daughters, ages 2 and 5, attend Family and Friends said she cannot understand how it could be co-owned by a sexual assault suspect.

"I can't believe they would be allowed to buy that if there were charges pending," said Lisa Price, of Lowell. "Doesn't anybody check out who's buying these places?"

State Department of Human Services spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet said the state is "investigating the allegations that the ownership of this center has changed."

State law does not allow ownership of a day-care center without a license, said Yolanda Sims, local supervisor of the Day Care Licensing Division of the state Department of Human Services. The day-care license, renewed in July, is under the name of Martha Kadolph, of Tallmadge Township, Sims said.

"She (Amanda Cross) can say she's the owner, but she's not the owner," Sims said. "They can't transfer the license."

The state on Wednesday sent Kadolph a letter telling her she is responsible for the center, which is licensed to care for up to 118 children, Sims said.

"If anything happened to anyone in that building, we hold (Kadolph) responsible," Sims said.

"She has that license."

State officials also have notified Kadolph that Kristopher Cross is not allowed at the center when children are present, Sims said.

Kadolph said she sold the center to the Crosses in late summer, but she continues to operate it.

"They own it, I run it, and the license is in my name," she said. "I've been told by the state I am fine."

The Kent County Clerk has no record of a business transfer.

Some parents have pulled children from the home over the controversy, Kadolph said. "Parents are scared to death," she said.

She said Kristopher Cross "has nothing to do with our facility."

Cross said he has been to the center only a couple of times on weekends to make repairs, when no children were there.

Cross said he and his wife bought the Alpine Township center about the time they were voluntarily shutting down their home at 2642 Fuller Ave. NE, which was licensed to care for 12 children.

That was about the time that a second girl came forward in August claiming he had sexually assaulted her. The state on Tuesday announced it had suspended the license for the home on Fuller.

Amanda Cross applied for a license to operate Friends and Family Center in July, but the state hasn't taken action on her request, Sims said. She wouldn't say why the state hasn't approved it. Before a license is approved, the state would conduct background investigations on the owner and the center director, Sims said.

Lisa Price, 38, whose daughters attend Family and Friends, said center officials recently told her and her husband they could write out day-care checks to the Crosses.

Price said she is considering removing her children from the center.

"When I heard about it, I thought, 'What else can I do? Where else can I put them?'" said Price, who works at The Press.

"There's no way I'm going to allow my daughters there with that type of possibility."

Cross was charged in October with two counts of first-degree criminal-sexual conduct involving a 5-year-old girl, and two counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct involving a 7-year-old girl at the home on Fuller.

He also is charged with possession of child sexually abusive material at his home, records show.

Cross said he didn't sexually assault the girls and didn't have child porn on his computer.

If there were images on his computer, it was from Internet "pop-ups," he said. "I haven't seen the pictures; I don't know what they found."

Police said the images were of teen-aged girls and not of girls from his day-care home.

Man who sexually abused three girls will be in prison until he's 103

Friday, December 2, 2005

By Tim Younkman
BAY CITY TIMES WRITER

A shackled prisoner being sentenced sat in the courtroom smirking as his victims described in excruciatingly painful detail how he had ruined their childhoods by forcing them into years of sexual bondage under threat of death.

Ricky J. Aikens, 42, of Bay City, showed little emotion, as the victims told of the stark and vicious way he treated them over 11 years of sexual abuse. The girls now are ages 16, 15 and 13. He was convicted by a Circuit Court jury in October of eight counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct.

After listening to the compelling stories from the victims and a denial by Aikens, Circuit Judge Lawrence M. Bielawski sentenced him to a minimum of 62 1/2 years and maximum of 95 years, adding he agreed with the assessment of the prosecution that Aikens would be 103 years old before he could get out of prison.

Aikens, wearing manacles and leg shackles, similar to ones he made his victims wear at various times as punishment, listened as Cindy Howell, the prosecutor's office victim rights coordinator, read letters to the court from two of the victims and their mother.

In heart-wrenching language, the letters described their feelings of intense pain, shame, self-loathing and even thoughts of suicide that Aikens inflicted on them during the 11 years of abuse. The third victim, a thin, shaking 15-year-old girl, read her letter to the court herself. In a soft and halting voice, she described the hell in which she lived.

"I've feared you and the sound of your voice," she said. "I know that you will never hit me again."

She said he threatened to kill her if she told anyone about the sexual acts he forced her to perform.

"I thought about killing you so many times," she said, choking back tears and causing family members listening to her to openly weep.

She added that she and her family will try to get back to a normal life now that they know he will be behind bars and away from them.

The victims' mother wrote in her letter that she didn't realize until this case began that he was "such a monster." She said Aikens robbed her daughters of their "state of innocence and womanhood."

The victim who finally broke the silence and risked death by talking about Aikens' crimes wrote in her letter that she was glad to be the one to stop him.

"I'm glad I finally spoke up," she wrote. She and the others all said they dreaded the night because that was often the time he made his sexual demands.

"I was so scared at night," she wrote.

"I don't think you have a heart," her letter read. "It's all black inside of you."

The third girl said the pain was almost unbearable.

"I have been waiting for this day to come my whole life," she said of his sentencing. "I was trapped in a dark place."

During Aikens' trial, the victims testified they were forced to perform sex acts with Aikens in numerous locations including his pickup truck.

Aikens testified that the girls were lying and that his DNA was found in those locations because he engaged in masturbation.

Assistant Prosecutor Richard Dresser told Judge Bielawski that despite Aikens' claim of innocence, "there is overwhelming physical evidence" against him.

"I don't think there is any chance he can be rehabilitated," Dresser added, noting that even with some good-time credits in prison, Aikens would be 103 years old when he completes his minimum sentence.

"That isn't enough," Dresser said, noting the trauma Aikens caused the victims.

He added that giving Aikens more than the 62 years of a minimum sentence wouldn't mean anything as far as punishment because of his age.

Bielawski said he agreed with Dresser and didn't comment on the bizarre remarks offered by Aikens, who claimed the girls were taught in school to make up stories and this is what they did in his case.

"There are not any words in the English language to describe your conduct," Bielawski said.

Dresser also praised the work of the Bay City police and Bay County sheriff's detectives in piecing together the evidence and bringing a strong case to court.

- Tim Younkman covers area police agencies and courts for The Times. He can be contacted at 894-9652, or e-mail at tyounkman@bc-times.com.

Parental rights decision delayed

Friday, December 02, 2005

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS

A disposition hearing to determine placement of 12 adopted children of Beryl and Jerome Richards, originally set for Thursday, was postponed until today because their attorney, Kevin Cronin, was sick, Kent County Family Court Judge Nanaruth Carpenter said. A jury Wednesday found the couple -- once the state's adoptive parents of the year -- responsible for abuse and neglect for allegedly beating the children with belts and extension cords as punishment, and ignoring complaints that older siblings allegedly sexually abused others. The verdict gave Carpenter jurisdiction over the children.

Published December 1, 2005

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Local news briefs

Autopsy results on 7-month-old still out

Lansing police are awaiting results of an autopsy performed Wednesday on a 7-month-old girl who was found in a duplex, Lt. Bruce Ferguson said.

Results won't be known for several days, he said.

Police officers and firefighter-paramedics went to the home at around 4:30 p.m. Tuesday after a family member called and asked them to check on the infant, Ferguson said.

Lesson leads to student drive to aid abused kids

The Battle Creek Enquirer

Students at W.K. Kellogg Middle School collected more than 1,000 items — including toys, diapers, food and clothes — for abused children during the past two weeks.

Four loads of donations already have been sent to Children's Protective Services, and more are on the way.

Student teacher Sue Fox started the project with 75 seventh-graders after they finished reading the book "The Outsiders," which features an abuse victim. The seventh-graders also watched a video about the resources and services that Children's Protective Services provides in the Battle Creek area.

The collection drive recently became a schoolwide effort, with more than 500 students in sixth through eighth grades participating.

"It's wonderful," said Judy Cumming, Children's Protective Services worker. "The project just kind of mushroomed after they saw our video ... These kids have done a great job."

Originally published December 2, 2005

Oakland County

Volunteer of the week

December 2, 2005

PHYLLIS WHITEHEAD, 56, of Birmingham.

Organization: Childhelp USA, which is dedicated to the treatment and prevention of child abuse and neglect. The Greater Detroit Chapter, based in Rochester, hopes to build an assessment center where children will live until their long-term future is decided.

What she does: Whitehead has worked on the group's annual fund-raiser for five years, the last three as cochair. This year's event was held in October. She developed a program to provide children with items not covered through state funding, such as sports equipment and musical instruments. She also has served on the board of directors for the last two years.

Personal: She is married to George Whitehead. She owns P.J. Whitehead's Interior Design Studio in Birmingham, and has been involved in several designer show houses for charities. She also volunteers with Variety -- the Children's Charity and Lighthouse of Oakland County.

If you'd like to help: Call 248-844-1547 during business hours or go to childhelpusa.org/michigan/.

To nominate a volunteer, contact Antionette D. Griffith at 313-223-4496 or agriffith@freepress.com.

November 30, 2005

FOSTER CARE PROVIDERS UNHAPPY WITH D.H.S. REGULATIONS

Dozens of adult care providers gathered on the third floor of the Capitol Wednesday to express their displeasure to lawmakers with a set of proposed state regulations, but some legislators said the providers' efforts were misguided.

Adult foster care representatives from around the state testified before the House Appropriations subcommittees on Human Services and Community Health, and were outraged by changes that would require additional paperwork, track employee records, increase training and encourage unionization. Many providers said additional training and paperwork would drive up costs, and a state-maintained central employee database, required by the rules, would infringe on employee privacy rights.

But one committee member expressed irritation with the hearing process. Rep. Alma Wheeler Smith (D-Ypsilanti) told the group that she sympathized with their concerns but legislators were not in a position to rewrite regulations drafted by the Department of Human Services.

"I think many of you came here with the expectations that this committee was going to be able to do something. I just want you to leave here today with the clear understanding that while you have been heard ... there is nothing we can do here," she said.

Providers attending the hearing, including members of the Coalition for Affordable and Quality Care said their efforts were not in vain. Donna Halinski of Marketing Resource Group, who helped organize coalition members and the trip to Lansing, said members got their message across to legislators. Lawmakers, she said, were moving particularly fast on adult foster care issues with very little input from industry stakeholders.

"We have major issues with both the process being flawed and the rules themselves. As the rules are today, they would divert direct services from resident care to redundant administrative responsibilities. Today, was a great opportunity to voice those concerns," she said.

Jim Gale, spokesperson for the Department of Human Services said the rules are still in the developmental stage.

One of the disputes in the issue is a draft of the rules that could increase training requirements and collective bargaining provisions. Mr. Gales said he did not know who created the draft, but that it is not the final version of the rules.

Coalition members speculated the author of the draft is someone invested in the labor movement. They said union organizations would not benefit employees because it would create the illusion that workers rights were being addressed, and it would require membership fees for a workforce that makes about \$8 an hour.

Chair of the Subcommittee on Community Health, Rep. Bruce Caswell (R-Hillsdale), requested the hearing in response to constituent concerns. He said the testimony provided a public forum for industry stakeholders to express their concerns and open up a public dialogue about adult foster care and homes for the aging.

“I decided to have the hearing because the impact of these rules could have a considerable financial cost, and that affects appropriations,” he said. “And it didn’t seem that the process was inclusive to all the people involved.”

He added, “I hope that we go back to the table and start over and do what’s best for the citizens of the state and have a better conversation.”

Ms. Smith said starting over isn’t necessary because there is still time to reevaluate and redraft the rules. She said the rules are not officially before anybody for comment or discussion because they are still being formed.

Addressing the group before the committee, Ms. Smith shared her concerns. “My problem with this process today is not that it gave you input but gave you false hope that we were going to be able to do something. And that is incredibly unfair.”

County expands health plan

Program for those who didn't qualify for Medicaid open to higher-wage bracket; ex-care provider files suit.

*Jim Lynch / The Detroit News
December 2, 2005*

MOUNT CLEMENS-- Macomb County is set to expand its year-old health plan for poor residents even as it defends a lawsuit filed by a company involved in the program.

The program, originally conceived to provide health coverage to low-income Macomb residents, soon will be available to those higher on the income ladder. But the company that used to run the clinics where residents received treatment recently filed for bankruptcy and alleges it was never properly reimbursed for its work.

Since late last year, Macomb County has provided coverage to an average of 3,000 residents each month through its insurance plan, which is available to those who don't qualify for Medicaid. Participants included those with incomes 35 percent or less of the federal poverty level.

"I consider it a success," said Commissioner Susan Doherty, D-Warren. "These are people that otherwise wouldn't have health coverage."

This week, coverage will be made available to residents whose incomes are 36 percent to 100 percent of the federal poverty level. To administer the original program, Macomb County created a nonprofit organization called County Health Plan Inc. That organization also will oversee administration of the new program, called Macomb Care Connect.

Macomb County's program works like an HMO in that residents select a primary care physician from several area clinics. Until August, those clinics were run by a company called Corporate Occupational Health Services Inc., which sued the county last month. The clinics are now run by Dearborn-based Midwest Health.

Corporate Occupational Health is headed by John Johnson, a local businessman whose various political action committees have donated to the campaigns of 16 of 26 current county commissioners. The largest single stakeholder in Corporate Occupational Health is Macomb County Commissioner Elizabeth Slinde, D-Roseville.

Slinde said Wednesday she became involved with the company when it first started, long before it had any clients. And she said she has abstained from any commission votes involving the company.

Mike Greiner, Johnson's attorney, said the county's failure to properly compensate Corporate Occupational Health drove the company into bankruptcy.

For lifetime Roseville resident James Goldwater, the lawsuit is no surprise. Goldwater appeared before the county commission two years ago challenging the hiring of Corporate Occupational Health because of Johnson's political connections.

"If they had listened to me a few years ago, they wouldn't be facing this problem," Goldwater said.

The arrangement may not constitute an ethical violation on the part of commissioners, but there is the appearance of a conflict, said John Chamberlin, professor at the University of Michigan's Ford School of Public Policy.

County spokesman Phil Frame said there was no conflict since the company was contracted by the nonprofit County Health Plan, not Macomb County.

"We don't have any direct connection with them, and the county board has no direct control over who is selected as a vendor," Frame said.

To qualify

Residents interested in Macomb County's health plan must meet federal poverty guidelines on income. They also must be 19 to 64 years old, be U.S. citizens, and must not be qualified for Medicaid or other medical programs.

For more information, call the county health department at (586) 469-5520.

Macomb County Briefs

Detroit News

December 2, 2005

Health plan offered for uninsured

Low-income residents interested in enrolling in Macomb County's new health plan for the uninsured can call (866) 622-6620. Coverage is available to county residents ages 19 to 64, with no minor dependent children, and who do not already qualify for Medicaid or other insurance programs. In addition, applicants cannot make more than \$800 a month individually or be part of a household earning more than \$1,070 a month.

For information about the Macomb Care Connect program, residents can visit their local Department of Human Services office.

States overpay for prescriptions

Thursday, December 01, 2005

Associated Press

WASHINGTON-- State Medicaid programs routinely pay much more for prescription drugs than do many businesses, hospitals and the Veterans Affairs Department, federal investigators said Wednesday.

Lawmakers as well as the Bush administration cited the study in calling for changes in the formulas that state Medicaid programs use to reimburse pharmacists.

The Senate and the House have passed bills that would lower how much the federal government pays pharmacists who serve Medicaid beneficiaries, but the two chambers have yet to work out the differences between the two bills.

"The government routinely overpays for prescription drugs. Until we revamp Medicaid's drug purchasing system, we're throwing away money that could be used to treat patients," said Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

The Government Accountability Office said its review of Medicaid payments for brand-name drugs in 2003 showed that states paid 12 percent more than the price that drug wholesalers pay drug manufacturers.

They paid 36 percent more than what many hospitals and other large-scale purchasers pay.

Most lawmakers agree state Medicaid programs should pay more than wholesalers pay. The question they're struggling with is how much more.

The Medicaid drug payment system reimburses pharmacies for drugs dispensed to beneficiaries.

Pharmacists may be unable to buy a drug at the price that wholesalers get it for, or hospitals get it for. Any change in the reimbursement formula could result in pharmacists losing money every time they see a Medicaid beneficiary, said one trade group.

"All we're asking for is to cover our expense for dispensing and a small margin for serving this patient base," said Charlie Sewell, vice president of government affairs for the National Community Pharmacists Association.

Mark McClellan, administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said the bottom line is that states pay prices that are out of whack with the market.

"The GAO report makes clear that the current payment rules result in overpayments for drugs and emphasizes the need for reform," McClellan said.

Medicare drug aid mess needs fixing

The Kalamazoo Gazette

Friday, December 2, 2005

Congressional investigators reported this week that the federal government's prescription drug discount card program, the precursor to a financial assistance program which will take effect next year, is riddled with problems.

Most senior citizens could have told us that. Ever since enrollment for the Medicare prescription drug-benefit program began in mid-November, phones have been ringing off the hook at government agency offices.

Lawmakers and government officials reported Wednesday that they found many flaws in a program that issued drug discount cards to 6.4 million Medicare beneficiaries in advance of implementing the full-fledged program next year.

Investigators from a nonpartisan arm of Congress said that problems they encountered included incomplete and inaccurate information disseminated by the government and insurance companies, along with improper use of the discount cards.

They also found that enrollment in the program was lower than expected because of "confusion and misperceptions about the drug cards among Medicare beneficiaries." The "abundance of choices" and the cards' uncertain value may have discouraged some people from enrolling.

A Medicare official defended the discount card program and said they've learned some valuable lessons that can be applied to the drug benefit next year.

We certainly hope so.

If seniors are in Medicaid or are low-income, they should make a decision about this program soon. The number to call for information is 1(800)MEDICARE. Drug coverage will begin on Jan. 1 for those who enroll before Dec. 31. Many programs have been offered in southwestern Michigan to help people navigate the confusing labyrinth of information that's being offered about the program.

On Wednesday, for example, Jo Murphy of the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan will be in Allegan to present a Medicare informational seminar starting at 1 p.m. in the Lifelong Learner's Senior Group at the Allegan Public Schools Administration Building, 550 Fifth St.

For senior citizens who already have drug coverage, our advice is not to rush into a decision. Take time to research the options and consider all the nuances. There are many.

The deadline for enrolling without penalty is May 15.

December 1, 2005

BILLS REQUIRE BACKGROUND CHECKS FOR LONG-TERM CARE EMPLOYEES

The House Senior Health, Security and Retirement Committee reported a package of bills on Thursday that includes required FBI fingerprint checks for all nursing home, hospice and adult foster care applicants. The bills would also expand criminal background checks for all potential employees of long-term care facilities and would require abuse and neglect training programs for home directors.

"By training 11,000 people across the state, this will be the largest abuse and neglect prevention training program in Michigan history," said Jan Christianson, spokesperson for the Department of Community Health.

The measures (HB 5166, HB 5167, HB 5168 and HB 5448) are all part of a \$25 million federal initiative to crack down on elder abuse. Michigan is one of seven states chosen for the Criminal Background Check National pilot project. The state was granted \$5 million to implement a system that could later be adopted on a federal level to protect the elderly and developmentally disabled living in state funded homes, from caregiver exploitation.

Among other things the bills include automatic employment disqualification for all felony conviction and for some misdemeanor drug charges. The Senate is considering similar legislation (SB 621, SB 622 and SB 623), but unlike the Senate version, the House legislation does not include annual checks and would create a review board to consider employment despite a conviction.

The Gateses Give \$84 Million to Help Prevent Infant Deaths

By DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.

The New York Times

Published: December 2, 2005

Focusing on a relatively forgotten corner of health care, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation donated \$84 million yesterday to two organizations working to prevent needless deaths of babies in the first few days of life.

While death rates for young children have dropped substantially since 1960 because of better nutrition and more vaccinations, deaths of newborns have "remained stagnant," said Anne Tinker, director of the Saving Newborn Lives program at the charity Save the Children, which received \$60 million.

Around the world, about four million newborns - about as many as are born in the United States annually - die each year from tetanus, pneumonia, asphyxia or low birth weight.

Many infection deaths could be avoided with measures as simple as a sterile razor blade for the umbilical cord, hand soap, a few antibacterial wipes, a dose of 25-cent antibiotics or a 40-cent tetanus shot. Many deaths from asphyxia, cold and diarrhea can be prevented by teaching young mothers and their relatives or midwives that a few mouth-to-mouth breaths may start a "blue baby" breathing and that newborns should be cradled next to the skin and fed nothing but breast milk.

"As a parent, I can't imagine anything more devastating than the loss of a child," Melinda Gates said in announcing the grants. "It's inexcusable for the world to let four million die each year."

Save the Children's efforts will be concentrated in 18 countries while PATH, a Seattle-based charity that received \$24 million, will use its share to run 17 projects in the two poorest states of India, which has nearly 30 percent of the world's newborn deaths.

Sometimes old birth traditions must be taken into account, Ms. Tinker said. In one Bolivian region, she said, umbilical cords are cut with sharp stones because people believe using a razor carries a curse, causing the child to become a thief. Her agency works to persuade families to boil the stones first.

In Nepal, said Dr. Christopher Elias, director of PATH, for good luck, the cord is cut against a rupee coin with a picture of a deity on it. His group's Nepalese birth kit includes a sterile plastic coin.

In parts of India, Ms. Tinker said, some babies are given to older female relatives and fed tea for three days, while in the Nepalese Himalayas, premature babies often die because newborns are normally "scrubbed with cold water and soap and left on a cold floor to dry."

Her teams teach mothers to wipe babies clean, wait three days before the first bath, keep babies cuddled next to the skin and breast-fed. In a trial in India, the procedures, called kangaroo mother care, reduce death rates for premature infants by 50 percent, she said.

The Gates foundation, which has a \$29 billion endowment from Mr. Gates, a founder of Microsoft, and his wife, has become one of the major forces in public health in the last few years.

Heating cost increases sad but necessary

Nation needs varied energy options to relieve reliance on natural gas

*The Detroit News /
Friday, December 02, 2005*

As the winter winds rip through Metro Detroit and home thermostats are kicked up a notch, news that Consumers Energy Co. will increase rates by as much as 47 percent is about as welcome as the mercury falling.

But before gouging investigations are called for, some perspective is in order. Consumers Energy, Michigan Consolidated Gas Co. and the few other smaller natural gas providers in the state aren't raising rates to line their pockets, but to recover increased costs associated with higher demand and damage to refineries as a result of the hurricanes in the Gulf Coast.

Such increases aren't approved without significant oversight and investigation by the Michigan Public Service Commission. Utility companies in Michigan also can only increase the costs associated with the commodity being sold, in this case, natural gas. There is no profit earned on the sale of such commodities in Michigan.

There's no question home heating bills that will increase by \$40 to \$50 a month for the average customer could place an unexpected burden on people's budgets. To alleviate some of the pain, Consumers Energy will recover those costs over a four-month period running through March.

That doesn't sit well with state Attorney General Mike Cox and some consumer advocates who say that the time period should have been much longer. Cox asked the commission to extend that period to 17 months, which is what MichCon agreed to do earlier this year.

That sounds good politically, but doesn't take several factors into account. First, MichCon's increase of up to 57 percent is harder to absorb in four months and the company has higher overhead costs than Consumers Energy. The average MichCon customer will pay \$217.80 a month, more than \$20 higher than customers of Consumers Energy.

Also, argues Consumers Energy spokesman Dan Bishop, spreading the costs out over a longer time would actually increase costs even more because if the utility absorbs the costs over a longer period of time and pays interest on that amount, it too increases and is passed on to consumers.

None of those reasons make it any easier to accept such rate increases, but there's little that can be done until other solutions are found. They are out there.

Primarily, safe drilling for natural gas must be allowed in areas that currently are off limits, such as Alaska, off the coasts and in Colorado, Bishop says. And nuclear power, which would reduce the price pressure on natural gas and home heating oil, must become a real option again.

Until such things happen, heating bills will continue to increase.

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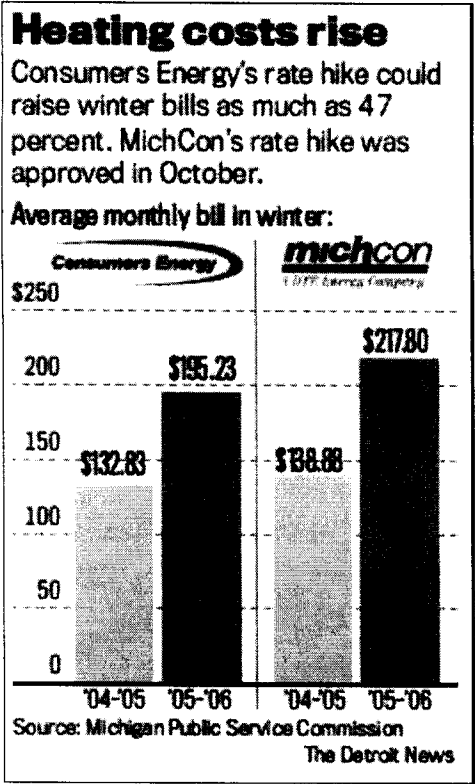
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Beating the cold

Groups hope to pool funds to help people avoid heat shutoffs

Friday, December 02, 2005

By Larry O'Connor
loconnor@citpat.com -- 768-4926

A proposed plan could double or triple money available to help people facing utility shutoff this winter, said Ken Toll, United Way of Jackson County's executive director.

The extra funds will be required, especially in light of this week's announcement that the average Consumers Energy customer bill will increase by about 50 percent this winter.

Under the proposal, faith-based and community service groups would earmark resources they normally use to help those facing shutoff notices, Toll said. By pooling their funds, the groups would increase their eligibility for matching grants.

Toll unveiled the strategy Thursday during a Utility Assistance Initiative meeting at Lily Missionary Baptist Church. The ad-hoc group will meet again Jan. 12 when organizations will declare how much money they will commit.

A letter will be sent to churches throughout the county, asking them to take part, said Bethany Timmons, director of United Way of Jackson County Community Impact.

Though well-received, the plan drew some skepticism and revealed philosophical differences in how faith-based and service organizations operate.

"When we say 'moneys are pooled' red lights go off through our organization," said Gary Grueneberg, president of the St. Vincent De Paul's Jackson District Council.

The new approach will offset the anticipated surge in what agencies describe as those in "situational poverty," who are experiencing financial hardship for the first time through job loss or medical crisis, said Brenda Leonard, Community Action Agency's director of community services.

Under a central disbursement strategy, collected money could be leveraged to solicit government and foundation matching grants, Toll said.

So far, the city of Jackson Mayor Martin Griffin pledged \$50,000 if a uniformed system can be devised. An unnamed community foundation also offered to do a dollar match, Toll said.

Through the state's Public Service Commission's "Heat a Home" campaign, a \$2 to \$1 match might be in the offing. United Way of Jackson County would oversee the fund.

Other church leaders backed the idea.

"It's attractive for me to say ! here is a system in place that works," said the Rev. Jim Watson of Christ Lutheran Church in Michigan Center.

How it would work

Friday, December 02, 2005

Jackson County 211 conducts pre-screening and refers people to state Department of Human Services;

If additional utility assistance is needed, referral is made to a local clearinghouse agency such as Love INC, Salvation Army, St. Vincent De Paul or Community Action Agency for further screening;

Those who qualify are entered into a database where faith-based or a similar organization would step in to help;

Organization notifies United Way, which releases the money to the individual; and, United Way provides a report on who was helped and how much was spent.

County food pantries show a disturbing growth trend

Friday, December 02, 2005

BARRIE BARBER
THE SAGINAW NEWS

No one has to tell Richard J. Premo the number of people in poverty has headed upward in Saginaw County the past few years.

He's seen it through the sharp hike in demand for food from Hidden Harvest, which recently added eight pantries to the 145 where it distributes 1.8 million pounds of food a year in the Tri-Counties.

"We've experienced an awful lot more food pantries coming into existence," said Premo, president and chief executive officer of the local Hidden Harvest operation. "There's tons of them.

"We're seeing the increase in Chesaning, St. Charles (and) Bridgeport. Many of the people we serve are the working poor."

U.S. Census Bureau figures released this week show the Saginaw County poverty rate rose to 13.4 percent, or nearly 27,500 people in 2003, the most recent year for which figures are available.

That's an increase of 1.2 percent from 2001. Nearly one out of five youths 17 or younger -- or 19.6 percent -- lived in poverty, figures show.

The county's percentage of poor of all ages exceeded the state mark of 11 percent and the national rate of 12.5 percent in 2003, data show. The county's median income then was \$37,843.

The census defined the poverty threshold in 2004 as a single person who earned about \$9,650 annually or less, or a family of four earning less than about \$20,000 a year.

A lack of good-paying jobs and people bypassing educational opportunities pushed poverty higher, said Randy R. Barst, director of the Saginaw County Family Independence Agency. Since 2003, charity officials say, demand has risen and will head higher if threatened Delphi Corp. wage and job cuts hit the county.

"We have not seen the effects of GM and Delphi yet, which is somewhat frightening," said Yvonne Riggins-Thomas, director of Neighborhood House, 3145 Russell, for Lutheran Social Services of Michigan.

County food pantries show a disturbing

No one has to tell Richard J. Premo the number of people in poverty has headed upward in Saginaw County the past few years.

He's seen it through the sharp hike in demand for food from Hidden Harvest, which recently added eight pantries to the 145 where it distributes 1.8 million pounds of food a year in the Tri-Counties.

"We've experienced an awful lot more food pantries coming into existence," said Premo, president and chief executive officer of the local Hidden Harvest operation. "There's tons of them.

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"We have not seen the effects of GM and Delphi yet, which is somewhat frightening," said Yvonne Riggins-Thomas, director of Neighborhood House, 3145 Russell, for Lutheran Social Services of Michigan.

"We don't seem to be able to sustain employment in Saginaw," said Cheryl Plettenberg, a County Department of Public Health employee who biannually studies area health and economic risks.

"There's not a future right now, unless you're in health care. There's no guarantee the job is going to be there."

For now, providers are seeing rising numbers of people who earn \$6 to \$8 an hour, often two parents working with no or little health insurance trying to support a family of two or three children.

"If one gets (their) hours reduced or loses their job, then they are just in dire straits," said Ann M. Bierman, Salvation Army director of marketing and development in Saginaw. "We're seeing a much higher trend of that than we've ever seen before."

More than a third of county residents don't have health insurance; in Saginaw, that share runs as high as 70 percent, Plettenberg said.

"People can get jobs, but they don't have good health insurance," she said. "Incomes are very low, our crime rate is very high, our gangs are huge."

"We've got trouble. There's no other way to put it."

While the ranks of those receiving Aid to Dependent Children through the FIA have fallen in the last five years to 8,315 last August from 9,600 in 2000, the number of people seeking food stamps, Medicaid, help to pay utility bills and emergency assistance has risen dramatically, agency figures show.

The number of food stamp recipients, for example, jumped to 33,857 this August from 21,084 in 2000.

At the same time, aid cases declined because "we have had to (put) more people off assistance to take marginally paying jobs," Barst said.

The Salvation Army, 2030 N. Carolina, has seen demand climb every year for the last three. Bierman has worked at the charity.

The amount of people clamoring to get help from its Christmas toy program more than doubled, to 6,573 in 2004 from 3,111 in 2002, Bierman said.

The charity has turned away at least 10 people daily who need help with utility bills -- sometimes thousands of dollars -- because it's waiting for more donations to replenish the fund, she said.

"We can't keep up with the requests for assistance," she said.

Neighborhood House has more people calling for help to pay utility bills to avoid a shutoff, too.

"Normally, we would get one or two calls a month," Riggins-Thomas said. "Now, we're averaging anywhere from three to four calls a week."

Charities have struggled, too. Neighborhood House, for example, expects to have \$100,000 less in its coffers by the end of this year than in 2004.

"There's a scarcity of funds in Saginaw County," she said, which puts a premium on the use of volunteers to maintain services.

"These are tough times," Premo said. "If there's an economic recovery happening in the United States, it's not happening in Saginaw County."

Barrie Barber covers politics and government for The Saginaw News. You may reach him at 776-9725.

Donate through Food Bank envelope and help a friend

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Friday, December 02, 2005

JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

FLINT - From giving loose change hidden in the couch to large corporate gifts, Flint Journal readers have proven that every little bit counts in the fight against hunger.

Envelopes are in today's Flint Journal for donations to the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan. Last year, the envelopes raised more than \$70,000 for the food bank's annual Face of Hunger holiday campaign.

This year's campaign aims to raise \$500,000, a steep goal in economically tough times like these. But for every \$1 received, the food bank can purchase \$14 worth of food.

For the past two weeks, The Journal has run a series of stories about some of the food bank's more than 380 partner agencies and their patrons. These stories illustrate that hunger doesn't discriminate. It can be anywhere - from your child's best friend to your grandma.

So make this year's charitable gift count - you might be helping someone you know.

Editorials & Letters

Feeding the needy

Use Flint Journal envelope to contribute what you can

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Friday, December 02, 2005

Today, The Flint Journal is providing a small assist so our readers might help thousands of needy people put food on their tables.

If the past is any measure, we're confident that many of you will use the envelope included in the newspaper to contribute to the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan, one of this area's most effective charities.

Stories before today have told about some of the agencies and people helped. We wished we could have reported that hunger is declining, but indications are the opposite in the 22 counties the Flint-based Food Bank serves.

Fortunately, the Face of Hunger holiday campaign has become increasingly successful, with this year's goal of \$500,000 the most ever sought. That money would do wonders, as the Food Bank obtains \$14 in buying power for each dollar collected.

All of this will be needed because of the additional hardships the Food Bank is coping with, including aiding Hurricane Katrina victims who received 200,000 pounds of food sent from the agency's warehouse to the Gulf region.

Some of those stocks have been restored, but local demand will be strong, too, with Michigan's economy continuing to struggle and the federal government mulling cuts in the food stamp program.

These challenges, however, should make those of us able to contribute more determined to do so.

Such spirit was shown Wednesday when workers and management at the General Motors Flint Truck Assembly Plant gave \$100,000 to kick off this season's Face of Hunger fund drive.

Collecting the remaining part of the goal requires similar generosity. Please use the envelope now in your possession to contribute what you can.

Food Drive under way

Dowagiac Daily News

Thursday, December 1, 2005 10:45 AM EST

This year, Ridge Napa Auto Parts will once again conduct its Annual Holiday Food Drive to benefit local families.

Zeta Chi Sorority of Dowagiac will be teaming up to help with the collection efforts, with a goal to help as many needy local families as possible.

If you would like to donate, please drop off your canned goods or nonperishable food items at Ridge Napa Auto Parts, 104 Division Street in Dowagiac.

A trailer, which was generously donated by MTL, will be located in front of the store from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m.

Donations will be collected until Dec. 16.

For additional information, call 782-2191.

While the holiday season is an enjoyable time for so many families, please consider helping those in our community who are less fortunate by making a donation today!

Remember, one person can make a difference and the donation you make will help brighten the hearts of our local families in need this holiday season.

Published December 1, 2005

Homeless: Shelters perform great work, but need is growing locally

A Lansing State Journal editorial

Lansing has its own, unofficial "700 Club", but it has nothing to do with TV televangelists.

It has everything to do with having a roof over your head.

Seven hundred: That's the estimated number of homeless people looking for shelter and a meal on any given night in the Lansing area. It's a number considerably higher than previous area homeless estimates, which ranged between 300 and 500.

However many there actually are, these are folks who have virtually fallen off society's map. Many have mental problems or histories of substance abuse. But, like it or not, they're ours. Ours to care for, or neglect.

Greater Lansing is fortunate to have institutions such as the City Rescue Mission and Volunteers of America who find ways, year after year, to care for the homeless.

These organizations have seen the need for homeless shelters grow. As reported in Wednesday's LSJ, the rescue mission has had to renovate its current facility on Michigan Avenue. The mission also has purchased a former elementary school on the south side, to house women and children.

Meanwhile, the VOA's New Hope Shelter has teetered on the edge of closing for much of the year due to funding losses. Thanks to funds from the city, Ingham County and Citadel Broadcasting, New Hope will remain open at least until early April.

There's other good news. Early next year, the community is expected to receive \$1 million from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority to create more housing for the chronically homeless. There will be a meeting about how to spend the state money at 8:30 a.m. today at Advent House Ministries, 743 N. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

The overall prognosis for the Lansing area's homeless is guardedly optimistic. The rescue mission and the VOA perform a great humanitarian service, thanks to a steady stream of mainly private donations.

Their work needs the community's sustained support.

Abandoned houses sometimes occupied

Friday, December 02, 2005

LaNIA COLEMAN
THE SAGINAW NEWS

A friend recently asked Saginaw Fire Department Battalion Chief Donald R. Coleman why firefighters continue to run into burning homes abandoned by their owners years ago.

"We never know when some homeless person is staying there," he explained.

Firefighters figured that was what they were facing when they were summoned Wednesday to a blaze at 4046 Fulton.

City tax records show the state had assumed ownership of the boarded-up house, but neighbors told Coleman a man had taken up residency there in March. They saw him enter the home shortly before the 1 p.m. fire but didn't see him leave.

Fortunately, Coleman said, the man escaped and was sitting in his van in the driveway when firefighters arrived.

A preliminary investigation revealed that someone had tampered with the electric meter so the house would receive service, Coleman said. Fire investigators believe the rigged service meter sparked a short that started the blaze in the attic.

Coleman said the structure, valued at \$10,000, is a complete loss.

The battalion chief said the problem occurs more than most residents realize. In March 2003, a 56-year-old homeless man froze to death inside an empty East Side Saginaw home that was for sale. The property owner found the man when he was showing the house to a prospective buyer. Authorities at the time said many homeless people avoid shelters because they don't want to forfeit their independence at facilities that grant 30-day stays to transients provided they follow strict routines.

Thursday, December 01, 2005

Katrina housing system flooded with problems Shoddy record keeping leaves government open to abuse

Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

The effects of Hurricane Katrina are still being felt in Metro Detroit and across the nation, and taxpayers are likely to feel the pinch for quite some time.

That's to be expected considering the catastrophic effects of the hurricane and the flooding that occurred in New Orleans in September. But the continued mismanagement of the Federal Emergency Management Agency -- most recently in regard to the housing of evacuees in area hotels -- is unacceptable and fiscally irresponsible.

FEMA has been blindly paying for hotel rooms for up to 330 evacuees staying in Michigan. As of last week, that number had dropped to 232, but no one truly knows if that number is accurate because the agency tracks hotel rooms, not individuals registered to them.

The blank-check system the agency has set up is fundamentally flawed and ripe for abuse.

FEMA has no idea who is staying in the rooms for which it is billed and has no procedure for checking the accuracy of bills. Hotels send the emergency agency a room count each week and are paid a minimum of \$325 per room.

Bills can be sent up to 14 days in advance, and the government pays the bills until it is notified the evacuees have checked out, or until Dec. 14, which is the date free housing ends in Michigan. Clearly this is a bad system.

At the Southfield Hotel, for example, five rooms registered to evacuees are vacant and four others are registered to people who can't be located. In many cases, neither the hotel operator nor the federal government is sure who has gone back to New Orleans, who has found permanent housing, who has gone on "extended vacation" or who has simply switched to another hotel. One evacuee contacted in New Orleans by The Detroit News said he signed paperwork checking out of the hotel, but three weeks later he remained on the billing list. Another who went back to New Orleans aboard a Greyhound bus remains on the list because he told hotel staff that he would eventually return.

Given the specificity with which hotels track business guests for everything from check-in and check-out times to snacks and drinks taken from the mini bar, it's hard to believe hoteliers are as clueless about their guests as they claim. Equally unsettling is FEMA's acceptance of such slipshod record keeping.

More than \$300 million already has been paid to house Gulf Coast residents left homeless after the hurricanes. Americans are happy to help those who are in need following a devastating natural event such as Hurricane Katrina.

But taxpayers deserve to know that their money was spent wisely and honestly. If not, they deserve a refund.

Jackson man allowed to visit killer

Friday, December 02, 2005

By Salina Ali

sali@citpat.com -- 768-4927

The nationally known case of Nathaniel Abraham -- the youngest convicted murderer in Michigan history -- has a Jackson connection.

Abraham, who was convicted as an adult in Oakland County for killing Ronnie Greene Jr. in October 1997, has been allowed supervised visits with uncle Lawrence Dottery, 39, of Jackson. He is serving his sentence at the W.J. Maxey Boys Training School in Whitmore Lake. Oakland County Family Court Judge Eugene Moore approved the visits in November, allowing Abraham to continue with visits with the Dottery family accompanied with Maxey staff. A member of the Dottery family declined comment.

Oakland County Chief Assistant Prosecutor Deborah Carley confirmed Abraham has had at least two supervised visits with Dottery.

Reached by telephone, Abraham's mother, Gloria Abraham, also declined to be interviewed, but said the court felt it was better for Abraham to have home visits with relatives outside the Pontiac area.

Now 19, Abraham was 11 when he shot Greene. Police said Greene was standing outside a party store in Pontiac when he was shot by Abraham. Abraham said he was practicing shooting at a tree when the bullet from his rifle struck Greene.

Abraham was sentenced as a juvenile and can be held only until his 21st birthday. He is expected to be released Jan. 19, 2007.

EDITORIAL

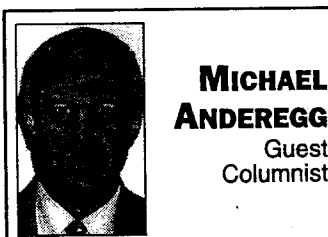
State honors adoption

Tuesday is Michigan Adoption Day. Adoption Day is a statewide celebration of the importance of safe, permanent families for children. Not every child is fortunate enough to grow up in a safe and stable environment. Each of us knows children who have lost a parent to death or divorce. We sometimes forget that children also lose parents because those parents have abused or neglected them.

A loving adoptive home gives such children a second chance. It gives them security, encouragement, and positive role models who can teach them how responsible adults behave.

Despite our best efforts, and the heroic efforts of foster families who provide temporary care for such children, there are children in Michigan, and here in Marquette County, who are growing up without a safe permanent family.

Research shows that such children lag behind their peers in many important areas: They are 51 percent less likely to be employed, 27 percent more likely to be jailed, 42 percent more likely to become a parent while still a teenager, and 25 percent



**MICHAEL
ANDEREGG**
Guest
Columnist

more likely to be homeless. If they "age out" of foster care without being adopted, they are truly on their own. Many experience substance abuse, domestic violence and poverty.

**Adoption Day is
an opportunity
for each of us
to reflect on the
importance of a
loving family
to a child's
development...**

Last year, 28 adoptions were finalized in the Family Division of the Marquette County Circuit Court. Some involved adoptions of stepchildren. Others involved adults or children whose biological parents consented to their

adoptions. Still others involved former foster children. Each of them was important.

Adoption Day is an opportunity for each of us to reflect on the importance of a loving family to a child's development, and to resolve to do whatever we can, individually, to assure that every child gets the opportunity to grow up in the kind of environment we want for our own children.

In the past two years, Marquette County has received three important awards: designation as an All-American County, listing as one of America's Most Livable Communities and most recently, in September recognition from the America's Promise Alliance as one of the 100 Best Communities in America for Young People.

Strong, stable families, including those provided by adoptions, help produce the kinds of community leaders we need to continue to earn similar recognition.

Hon. Michael J. Anderegg is the presiding judge of the Family Division of the Marquette County Circuit Court. He is president of the Upper Peninsula Probate Judges Association and past president of the Michigan Probate Judges Association.

More people finding work

Macomb's 5.6% jobless rate lowest this year, but manufacturing sector struggling

PUBLISHED: December 2, 2005

By Dan Heaton
Macomb Daily Business Editor

Despite a "contraction" in local manufacturing activity, unemployment in Macomb County stands at its lowest level in more than a year and a half as the calendar moves toward the holidays.

After expanding for two months, the overall Metro Detroit Purchasing Managers Index fell back sharply in November to 47.6, indicating a contraction in the local manufacturing sector, said a Lawrence Technological University professor who conducts the monthly report.

Unemployment in the Detroit region was 6 percent in October, down from 6.4 percent in September and from 7.4 percent in October 2004. Macomb County's 5.6 percent was the lowest rate recorded so far this year and represents the third straight month in which the rate has declined after peaking at 7.9 percent in July.

According to the Michigan Dept. of Labor & Economic Growth, 399,802 people were working in Macomb County in October, the third-highest total for the year and the fourth-highest number since 2002, when state records show more than 400,000 people were working in the county in most months. Total employment in Macomb County peaked in June of 2000 when 422,636 people were drawing paychecks in the county limits. Since then, the county has lost more than 20,000 manufacturing jobs.

"On the face of it, it looks like things are picking up," said Sam Kahan, economist with the Detroit branch of the Federal Reserve Bank.

"The data is open to different interpretations for a couple of months until we get a little further out, but we do know that the Michigan job picture is better than it was in the summer, but not as good as the national number," he said. "The question is, how much better can we get it?"

In a report issued Thursday, Lawrence Technology professor David Allardice said the Purchasing Managers Index, which fell to 47.6 in November after a 60.4 reading in October was pulled down by lower production, fewer new orders, lower inventories and significantly lower employment gains. An index number of greater than 50 represents growth in the manufacturing sector.

The index report said that significant weakness was evident in employment (index of 38.9) and high prices (index of 77.2) continue to persist into November. While easing somewhat, energy related prices remain high.

"Interestingly, problems continue to persist in the supply chain due to the 2005 hurricane season, with some reporters anticipating the adverse effects have still not run their course," Allardice said in the report.

A spokesman for the Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth said the October job loss in manufacturing was due to temporary layoffs in the auto industry.

"Since October 2004, total employment levels increased in 16 of the state's major labor market areas," said Rick Waclawek, director of the Bureau of Labor Market Information & Strategic Initiatives. "Overall, employment growth and unemployment rate declines were fairly typical for October due to seasonal job gains, primarily with local schools filling their ranks with support staff."

According to the department's monthly survey, the number of payroll jobs in Michigan increased in October by 16,000 to a total of 4,408,000. Job gains occurred primarily in local government education, with an increase of 18,000, and state government education, an increase of 5,000, with the continued return of students to colleges, universities and local schools.

Private-sector payroll jobs edged downward statewide in October by 6,000 or 0.2 percent. Within the private sector, a seasonal drop in leisure and hospitality services, down 10,000 positions, was somewhat offset by a seasonal gain in education and health services, plus 5,000 jobs.

Calling 211 not always easy as 1-2-3

Friday, December 02, 2005

The Muskegon Chronicle

FROM LOCAL REPORTS

Glitches in a new information referral help line for Muskegon County residents are keeping some people from accessing the service.

Community Access Line of the Lakeshore, also referred to as CALL 2-1-1, has received numerous reports from agencies and businesses that say they are unable to get through by dialing 211, according to Susan Howell, the help line's director.

"This has been of concern to us, and we've been exploring possible explanations," Howell said Thursday.

Officials of the help line service were advised by their phone service technicians that one cause could be companies who have blocked employees from calling 411 for directory assistance, which can also block access to 211.

"Some companies may be blocking their employees' ability to dial these numbers in an effort to discourage personal calls," said Maggie Jensen, marketing director for CALL 2-1-1.

Those attempting to dial 211 from a restricted phone would likely hear dead air, a fast busy signal or a recording.

Howell advises that those businesses or organizations experiencing a barrier to using the three-digit code report it to their building's technical staff, or to the help line by calling the seven-digit number, 739-5858, instead.

The telephone referral service became accessible to Muskegon County residents in August. By dialing 211 any time of day or night, people can request information from an operator using a database of nearly 1,000 community services.

It is a free call, but the three-digit direct dial is not available from cell or pay phones. From those phones, individuals must dial (231) 739-5858 or toll free at (800) 442-0054. On the Internet, the service may be accessed at www.CALL-211.org.

Getting the help line up and running was two years in the making for several organizations, with the United Way of Muskegon County leading the effort. Prior to CALL 2-1-1, Muskegon-area residents accessed similar information through Community Access Line of the Lakeshore.

Established in 2002, it served as a clearinghouse of information to the public of more than 2,000 local human service resources in Muskegon, Ottawa and Oceana counties such as hours, program eligibility requirements and intake procedures. Like the new service, it was coordinated by Senior Resources in Muskegon.

The line is meant to provide critical help such as emergency shelters and evacuation routes during natural disasters and direct people to programs and 200 agencies that can help in areas such as unemployment, health care and utility assistance. The service is multilingual and confidential.

Before 211 was implemented, seven-digit calls to Community Access Line of the Lakeshore averaged between 1,200 and 1,300 calls per month. In August and September, after the line went to three digits, calls increased to 1,900 per month. There were nearly 2,600 calls in October. Marketing via billboards apparently helped increase the call volume.

"We are excited about the positive impact 211 is having on our community," Howell said.

"Thanks to a great community network, word is spreading quickly and people are using 211 to connect with health and human services."

Metro Detroit

United Way to open crisis call center

Detroit Free Press

December 2, 2005

Do you need help? Can you help someone else? Do you know where to turn in a crisis? Starting Monday, it's all going to be as simple as 2-1-1.

The United Way for Southeastern Michigan, with the financial backing of several foundations and corporations, plans to roll out its 2-1-1 Call Center at 10:30 a.m. Monday at its Detroit headquarters.

The multilingual information and referral service will connect people in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties to health and human services, as well as volunteer opportunities 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The service also can disseminate public health and emergency preparedness information in a crisis.

Trained operators will direct people to more than 5,000 programs addressing a wide range of needs, said El Cabrel Lee, director of United Way 2-1-1.

By Jack Kresnak

Food, clothing bank needs grow during holiday season

Friday, December 02, 2005

By Dale Dieleman
The Grand Rapids Press

ZEELAND -- Make your list, check it twice, then add a few items.

That's the holiday suggestion from Kathy Bull, executive director of His Harvest Stand ministry in Zeeland.

"Our needs are continuous," she said. "If people would just add three items to their grocery lists when they shop, it would take care of us."

The food and clothing pantries of His Harvest Stand are getting bare of household essentials, especially those not covered by food stamps, Bull said.

Everything from cleaning supplies, toiletries, shampoo, toothpaste and light bulbs are necessities many families do without this time of year.

Topping the list, now, however, are boys' and girls' winter coats.

This is Bull's first winter as director of His Harvest Stand, a ministry supported by Zeeland area churches and donors.

Due to unemployment and rising home heating costs, Bull said she has noticed many more new faces coming to HHS this winter.

"We're seeing more people who never thought they would ever have to come here," she said.

"Just coming here is very difficult for them. They come in and say, 'I can't believe I'm sitting here. I don't know what to do and where to go.' "

Rising energy costs also cause a "ripple effect" among the donor population, she explained. "As costs go up, people are less likely to donate as they have in the past."

His Harvest Stand cannot help with rent or mortgage payments, utility or phone bills, she said.

However, she said, "If people could give gas or phone cards, that would be greatly appreciated."

The increased need countywide is echoed by Eric Morgan, executive director of Tri-Cities Love INC, in Grand Haven.

"We have been serving 1,000 people through our food party," Morgan said. "We are now at 174 percent over last year."

The No. 1 need at Love INC is funds to help others pay clients' energy bills, he said.

Donors can receive a 50 percent tax credit, up to \$400, thanks to Love INC's state certification as a food bank.

Next to monetary contributions, Morgan said Love INC's furniture and appliance ministries are low on inventory. Used items are accepted, especially twin beds, dressers and gas stoves. Love INC will arrange pick-up service such goods.

Back at His Harvest Stand, Bull explained a collaborative ministry with Second Harvest Gleaners, of Grand Rapids, brings in thousands of pounds of perishables, including produce and dairy products.

These are purchased by HHS at \$250 for each 5,000 pounds, to cover the gleaning and transportation costs. The goods are distributed monthly at three sites in and around Zeeland. The funds are donated by area churches.

One of HHS's annual programs, the "Christmas Basket," also is falling behind the need this year, Bull said.

Qualifying families fill out "wish lists," which families, churches or individuals help fill, she said. The lists show how desperate some area families have become.

The "wish" items include socks, underwear and blankets. "These could be incredible gifts for some families," Bull said.

For more information, call His Harvest Stand at (616) 772-3772 or stop in at 36 N. Elm St., in Zeeland, from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays.

Visit Tri-Cities Love INC at 1106 Fulton St., in Grand Haven. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. To arrange donation pick-up, call (616) 846-2701.

December 1, 2005

Cheer Club need is growing

By JOHN PEPIN, Marquette Mining Journal Munising Bureau

MUNISING - As is often the case during the season of giving, there is more than enough need to go around.

So it isn't surprising that Alger County residents are among those needing Cheer Club donations to help them through this holiday season.

Though a variety of programs help Alger County's branch of the Michigan Department of Human Services distribute gifts and donations to needy families, Cheer Club donors can offer contributions especially appropriate for the county's families.

John Sherman-Jones, coordinator at the Alger office, said some types of donations are often needed, but not necessarily received.

"We don't always get donations of clothing and gifts for teens," Jones said.

So far, donations to the Alger County Department of Human Services offices are coming in, but Jones said he isn't sure how things will ultimately pan out.

"It's a little too early to tell," Jones said. "Right now, we're running fairly close to last year."

Cheer Club donations for Alger County may be dropped off at the Munising Bureau of the Mining Journal, located at 411 Elm Avenue, Room 109.

Donations also can be dropped off until Christmas at any of these locations: Mining Journal offices at 249 W. Washington St., Marquette; 118 E. Division St., Ishpeming; the Marquette Township office at 161 Co. Rd. 492, Marquette; and the Ace Hardware Store at 193 E. M-35, Gwinn.

Items can also be dropped off at the Marquette Salvation Army at 1009 W. Baraga Ave. or the Ishpeming Salvation Army at 222. E Division St.

Good deeds: Celebrating unsung heroes

Good Deeds: Group to give 175 kids bikes for Christmas

Variety's 9-year-old campaign brightens holiday for needy; charity reports donations are up this year.

*Janet Sugameli / Special to The Detroit News
Thursday, December 01, 2005*

PONTIAC -- For more than 150 children, Christmas will come a few weeks early, thanks to a group called Variety, The Children's Charity.

The organization next week will host a holiday party at Welcome Baptist Church in Pontiac to distribute new bicycles to children selected by local nonprofit agencies.

Michael Bressler, co-chairman of the "Bike for Kids" campaign, said he got involved with the event more than six years ago "to see the looks on the kids faces that have never had a new bike or had a bike at all."

Bressler said people have generously donated to the cause.

"We thought it would be a real struggle but the party is nearly a week a way and we're doing great," said Bressler, a Birmingham resident. "We're seeing positive response this year, because instead of the typical 150 bikes there are more like 175 bikes we're able to give this year."

The gifts, which include a bike, helmet and lock, may be the only gift some of the kids receive this holiday, he said.

The children are selected through nomination by organizations in the Pontiac area that Variety supports.

"The bike gives them some independence," Bressler said. "They can help around the house, do some chores or even get a paper route. It helps them get some pride. ... They might be able to ride their bike to school, and it might even help in their attendance."

Some of the bikes are customized for children with special needs.

Variety has given more than 2,800 bicycles to children during the past nine years of the Bikes for Kids campaign. The bikes are being donated through a special giving campaign.

Jennie Cascio, executive director of the Detroit chapter of Variety, an international charity, said the annual event is one of the highlights of the year for her.

"To own a bike, is something every kid dreams of," she said. "We are able to do this because of the people who support Variety and want to give this to such deserving children."

She recalled giving her own children a bike and the excitement that went along with it.

"There have been kids who have really walked to the facility to get their bikes -- to get something that we take for granted with our children," Cascio said. "The generosity of our supporters is really what makes this happen."

The supporters who donated the bikes actually hand them to the children.

To buy a bike for a child, donors from across Southeastern Michigan each can pledge a tax-deductible contribution of \$182.45. To donate a bicycle, contact the Variety office at (248) 258-5511.

Youth council: Needy teens need presents, too

Advisory group seeking holiday gift donations

By ERIN KOSNAC
Times Herald

Jane Robinson wants the holidays to be special for needy teenagers in the area.

For her, that means making sure they get something they want and not just something they need.

"Generally, they end up getting a coat and gloves, things they really need," said Robinson, executive director of Kids in Distress Services in St. Clair. "But it's Christmas, and I want them to have something special, something they want."

To make that happen, Robinson is working with the Youth Advisory Council of the Community Foundation of St. Clair County on a Toys for Teens drive, which has been extended through Dec. 9.

As part of the drive, people are asked to donate a new gift for children ages 13 to 18. Items will be given to Kids in Distress, which will distribute them to needy teens in the area.

Kids in Distress works with 82 agencies in St. Clair County to provide needy teens with everything from furniture and clothing to school supplies. In the past year, Kids in Distress has worked with 7,000 kids in the county.

Tara Russel, a program associate at the community foundation, said the Youth Advisory Council had worked on a clothing drive for Kids in Distress in November and was excited to work on another project for the agency.

"The Toys for Tots cutoff is around 12 years old, so if you are a teenager, there really isn't much for you," Russel said. "The kids (on the advisory council) are this age, and they were so excited to be able to do something to help other teens."

Robinson has received a donation of 200 tickets for free skating. She said CDs, cosmetics and gift certificates are other possible donations.

"I hate to say that teenagers are forgotten during the holidays, but a lot of times people think about the younger children," she said.

"But even if you're a teenager, you still want to get a toy, something special, something you don't really need. We're trying to make that happen for as many teens as we can."

Contact Erin Kosnac at (810) 989-6276 or ekosnac@gannett.com.

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Medical society throws party for kids

More than 200 underprivileged children in Detroit will receive new winter jackets, books and games during the 20th annual holiday party presented by the Wayne County Medical Society Foundation. The party will run from 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at the Detroit Science Center at 5020 John R at the intersection of Warren and John R. Physicians, medical students, physician spouses and staff of the Wayne County Medical Society of Southeast Michigan will treat the children to lunch, an educational tour of the Science Center, a visit from Santa and an IMAX movie, "Santa Versus the Snowman."



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

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Michael Foley appointed chief operating officer of Early Childhood Investment Corporation

December 1, 2005

LANSING – The Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) Executive Committee today announced the appointment of Michael Foley as chief operating officer for the ECIC. The ECIC is a non-profit public corporation focused on coordinating and expanding resources and services dedicated to children zero to five. As part of its role, the ECIC oversees development and implementation of the Great Start System – a community-based focus on children from birth to age five.

As chief operating officer of the ECIC Foley will report to the chief executive officer and serve as the director of the day-to-day operations of the ECIC. The ECIC Executive Committee is currently conducting a search for a chief executive officer, which they hope to complete by January 2006.

Foley currently serves as the assistant director of child welfare services in the State Court Administrative Office and statewide manager of Michigan's Foster Care Review Program. Prior to joining the State Court Administrative Office he served as the executive director of Children's Charter of the Courts of Michigan, a statewide child advocacy organization involved in a variety of issues related to children and Michigan's court system.

Foley has been Michigan's state leader for Healthy Families America, an initiative to help communities develop high quality services for families with children age zero to five. He has managed several state-level child and family initiatives including Lieutenant Governor Connie Binsfeld's Commission on Adoption Issues and a two-year initiative of the Michigan State Bar Association on children in the courts.

Governor Jennifer M. Granholm announced the creation of the ECIC in her 2005 state of the state address. The ECIC was formed through a partnership with the Michigan Department of Human Services and the intermediate school districts. The ECIC operates in both the public and private sectors to help all Michigan families provide a great start for their children from birth to age five. ECIC goals are: to provide a focal point in state government for the developing Michigan's Great Start system; to serve as a clearinghouse of information, resources and technical assistance for early childhood system-building efforts; and to partner with and support local communities through Great Start Collaboratives.

For more information about the ECIC visit the Great Start Web site at www.greatstartforkids.org.

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